

## **THAILAND: THE PATH TOWARD RECONCILIATION**

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Chairman Faleomavaega, Ranking Member Manzullo, Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be able to come before you today to discuss recent events in Thailand, our long-time friend and treaty ally in Southeast Asia. While the streets of Bangkok have returned to relative calm, the situation remains fragile, and the issues that must be addressed for calm to become stability are complex and challenging. Thailand has just experienced the worst political violence in a generation. The causes of the recent events are complex and the consequences are not easy to predict. We were greatly saddened by the loss of life that resulted from the clashes. One hopeful sign, however, is that the Thai political debate is once again taking place in the Parliament rather than through violent street protests.

Our friendship with Thailand is based on a relationship that spans over two centuries, and a common set of values that define our two peoples. Among these are a commitment to democracy, an emphasis on good governance, accountability and transparency in the actions of governments, and the rights of peaceful freedom of assembly and expression. These values are an integral part of the vibrant society that Thailand is today, and they must serve as important touchstones for all sides in efforts to chart a path forward to national reconciliation.

The importance to the United States of our longstanding friendship with Thailand cannot be overstated. As one of only five U.S. treaty allies in Asia, Thailand remains crucial to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The U.S. Mission in Thailand – one of the largest in the world – affords the U.S. a regional operating platform that would be difficult to replicate elsewhere. Our bilateral relationship provides incalculable benefits – in health and security, in trade and investment, in law enforcement cooperation and humanitarian assistance to refugees – to both countries.

The last several years have been turbulent for Thailand. The restoration of elected government in early 2008 ended the short-lived post-2006 coup interim government but left major divisions in the Thai body politic. Court decisions forced two Prime Ministers from office in 2008, and three times in the past two

years the normal patterns of political life took a back seat to disruptive street protests. The yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) occupied Government House from August to December 2008, shutting down Bangkok's airports for eight days, to protest governments led by the People's Power Party (PPP), the heir to the Thai Rak Thai Party of deposed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The fall of the PPP-led coalition government in December 2008, and its replacement by the current coalition, reversed the previous political configuration. In April 2009, the red-shirted United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) disrupted a regional Asian Summit and sparked riots in Bangkok after Mr. Thaksin, now a fugitive abroad in the wake of his conviction on abuse of power charges, called for a revolution to bring him home. Neither of these earlier protest cycles, however, approached the March 12 - May 19 crisis in terms of the human and financial toll exacted. The crisis – which paralyzed the government, left 88 people dead, and caused an estimated \$1.5 billion in arson-related property losses – accentuated major political cleavages in the Thai population.

Throughout the recent turmoil, the United States has been active in promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and the peaceful settlement of political disputes. Secretary Clinton, for example, released a video message to the Thai people on April 13 urging peaceful dialogue. Our Embassy in Bangkok engaged with Thai government officials at all levels and leaders of the opposition red-shirt movement to underscore both the value we place on our relationship with Thailand and the importance of resolving political differences through compromise rather than force or violence. We also worked to ensure that we were doing everything possible to protect the safety and well-being of American citizens in Thailand.

While the government succeeded in ending the protest and restoring order, the fundamental divisions within Thai society that lie at the root of the political tensions remain. We welcome PM Abhisit's vow to follow through on the "reconciliation roadmap" proposal he originally put forward with the goal of ending the UDD protest peacefully. We support the establishment of an independent fact-finding commission to review the incidents of violence from March-May and determine who was responsible. While this would be a positive first step, it should not be the last. Now more than ever, it is critical for all Thai actors to promote dialogue and reconciliation, to recognize the legitimate grievances of Thai citizens, to support the equal and impartial application of the law, and to forswear the use of violence to resolve political differences.

The Prime Minister's original proposal included a date in November for early elections. He has since indicated that conditions in Thailand do not allow for November elections. The door to early balloting is not closed, however, and while it will be up to the Thais to work out the date, the Prime Minister's own plan acknowledged that democratic elections are an important part of reconciliation.

The United States has stressed consistently that all sides should work out differences within Thailand's democratic framework and without resorting to violence. Assistant Secretary Campbell reiterated this point on his recent visit to Bangkok. The right to peaceful assembly is a key component of Thai democracy, but Thais must also exercise their responsibility not to let that peaceful assembly turn violent. Responsible leaders across the Thai political spectrum and in civil society need to emphasize to their supporters that in a democracy, violence has no place in politics. Leaders who refuse to condemn violent acts do a disservice to their cause, to their supporters, and to their country.

Thailand remains one of our oldest treaty allies in Asia and our close friend. The U.S. can be a source of support as the Thai work to resolve the issues that still divide them, but it is the Thai people themselves who must make the difficult choices on how to proceed. For our part, the United States will continue to do what we can to promote reconciliation among the Thai people, and to preserve and strengthen this enduring friendship.